

## About WISCOMP

Initiated in 1999, WISCOMP is a project of the FOUNDATION FOR UNIVERSAL RESPONSIBILITY, in New Delhi, India. It is a South Asian initiative that works at the confluence of peacebuilding and security studies. Gender concerns provide the leitmotif of its programs.

### Exploring the Roots of Harmony: India and Pakistan

*Exploring the Roots of Harmony: India and Pakistan* is the result of a Media Project undertaken by Rinku Dutta, who was awarded a *Scholar of Peace* fellowship by WISCOMP in the year 2005. Awarded by WISCOMP for academic research, media projects and special projects, the *Scholar of Peace* fellowships are designed to encourage original and innovative work by academics, policy makers, defense and foreign affairs practitioners, creative artistes, NGO workers and others. The fellowships are seen as an important means to encourage work at the interface of gender with security, conflict resolution, and peace. The studies undertaken are expected to provide better information about problems that pertain to security, promote understanding of structural causes of conflict, and suggest alternatives towards non-violent intervention and peacebuilding.

The sixteenth in the series WISCOMP Discussion Papers, *Exploring the Roots of Harmony: India and Pakistan* draws attention to multiple facets of shared historical and cultural legacy that can help create mutual understanding between the two nations. Rather than emphasize division and contention, the monograph seeks to highlight the vast common ground occupied by Pakistan and India. By thus highlighting deep-rooted commonalities, she contributes to a multifaceted, complex process of mitigating prejudices and building bridges across the boundaries. Written in a lively and accessible style, the intent of the pieces is nevertheless consistently serious. The contributions of contemporary youth groups and some artists are also discussed, as part of the process of creating freer national boundaries and a transnational culture as well as politics.

Rinku Dutta is currently engaged in post-doctoral research on the genomic analysis of Retinoblastoma, a cancer of the eye, at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, U.S.A. She received her doctorate degree in Molecular Biology and Biochemistry from Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey and Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. For the past five years she has been exploring South Asia, taking up various teaching assignments in Nepal, Pakistan and India. In 2006, she did a research consultancy at the Lahore Museum, working on a catalogue for their Neo-Bengal School of Art watercolor paintings collection.

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## WISCOMP Discussion Paper

# 16



WISCOMP  
Foundation for  
Universal  
Responsibility

## Exploring the Roots of Harmony: India and Pakistan

Rinku Dutta





20 July 2007

# **Exploring the Roots of Harmony: India and Pakistan**

**Rinku Dutta**

## Exploring the Roots of Harmony: India and Pakistan

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Foundation for Universal Responsibility

Of His Holiness The Dalai Lama, New Delhi, India, 2007.

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### Cover Description

The photograph is of a plaque from the Saidpur temple complex at Islamabad. Below the 'Om' sign the inscription in Urdu written in Nasta'liq script reads:

*Yeh upar ka kamra aur branda Shriman valid buzurgvar Lala Dooni Chand Ji aur bhrata Mohan Chandoo Mangal Sen Ji Suri surghashiyon ki yadgar mein Bhakt Khayali Ram Ravail Chand Suri ne tameer karaye. Phagun 1997 Samvat.*

This upstairs room and veranda were constructed by Bhakt Khayali Ram Ravail Chand Suri in memory of his heaven-residing respected father Lala Dooni Chand Ji and brother Mohar Chandoo Mangal Sen Ji Suri. Phagun 1997 Samvat (1941 of the Gregorian calendar) – Hindus and Muslims both used Urdu before it became associated with identity-politics and Hindus turned away from it. Pre-1947, Hindus in Saidpur village were clearly not politicized into conflating Urdu as Muslim and Devanagari as Hindu.

*The views expressed here are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect those of WISCOMP or the Foundation for Universal Responsibility of HH The Dalai Lama, nor are they endorsed by them.*

*I dedicate this effort to my parents,  
the late Lily and Gopal Dutta.  
They cultivated hearts sans borders.*

### ***This is a Declaration of War***

*Against all gods  
Against all religions  
Against all 'isms'*

*That separate one human being from another  
That privilege one kind of people as superior  
And brand others as inferior*

*That breed hatred  
That are against love*

*This is a declaration of war  
Against all such belief systems*

*This is a declaration of love  
This is a declaration of love*

*by Tanveer Abbasi  
(my late Father-in-law)*

*(Translated from the original Sindhi poem 'Jang jo Elaani aa'  
by Sarmad Abbasi and Rinku Dutta)*



# Contents

|                                                          |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Acknowledgements .....                                   | 7  |
| Preface .....                                            | 9  |
| Introduction .....                                       | 11 |
| Registering in Lahore .....                              | 13 |
| A Taste of Berries .....                                 | 16 |
| Lest It's Too Late: Towards a Visa-free South Asia ..... | 19 |
| Dupatta Days .....                                       | 26 |
| Now Temple, Now Restaurant .....                         | 29 |
| Coins Tell Tales Too .....                               | 34 |
| Art and Pluralism .....                                  | 39 |

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This has been a tremendous growing experience. Many people have nurtured me through this process, which had its fair share of highs and lows.

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I am very thankful to Dr. Indrani Bose for strongly recommending me for the fellowship and for expressing her confidence in my ability to master the art of journalism.

Historian and British citizen Vanita Sharma and I had received the fellowship jointly. The sharing of our diverse experiences of living in Pakistan, our many conversations over home-delivered chicken tikka pizzas at the Lahore University of Management Sciences residence at Lahore and gulab jamuns at the Reliance Guest House in Delhi have enormously contributed to the maturation of my perspective on the issues discussed in this collection of essays. If it weren't for Vanita, I wouldn't have discovered Saidpur. We went there to find out whether it was her ancestral village. Compared and contrasted with her experiences and views, I could better assimilate my own.

Dr. Isa Daudpota took an active interest in the project, helping both Vanita and me to connect with whosoever we needed to meet. Thanks to his friend Arshad Abbasi, we met Ghulam Nabi and Irij Zaman, two reliable sources of information on the history of Saidpur. I am very grateful to both Nabi and Zaman for their generosity and hospitality, and for sharing their knowledge of Saidpur. I thank Dr. Daudpota for his masterful editing of many of these essays and for urging me towards the finishing line.

I have benefited a great deal from talking to historians Anand Taneja and Dr. Tahir Kamran.



I am very grateful to WISCOMP and Meenakshi Gopinath for giving me this excellent opportunity. Soumita Basu's cheerful help was much appreciated. So, too, Deepti Mehrotra's initial guidance. Stuti Bhutnagar has been most patient and forgiving with the inordinate delay in finalizing the manuscript.

I thank my brother Debashis Dutta for his unwavering faith in my ability to meet my goals.

**Rinku Dutta**

The *Scholar of Peace* fellowships awarded by WISCOMP for academic research, media projects and special projects are designed to encourage original and innovative work by academics, policy makers, defense and foreign affairs practitioners, creative artistes, NGO workers and others. The series WISCOMP Discussion Papers brings the work of some of these scholars to a wider readership. The monograph *Exploring the Roots of Harmony: India and Pakistan*, the outcome of a Media Project awarded to Rinku Dutta, is the sixteenth in the series.

*Exploring the Roots of Harmony: India and Pakistan* is a lively and insightful set of articles. These articles together explore possibilities inherent in the fact of shared historical and cultural roots that go deep into the soil of the two nations. Dutta's work suggests that the path to peace is not linear rather it is complex, nuanced and multifaceted. Mutual understanding between Pakistan and India requires engagement with a vast storehouse of facts, using these to build bridges of mutual appreciation and respect. Prejudices divide people across national boundaries, and these can be muted only by sincere efforts. Our substantial common heritage requires serious research, and presentation from several angles. Rather than emphasize the differences between these two nations, Dutta draws attention to many common features, and an expansive underlying common ground. She highlights the significance of present-day youth groups committed to free movement across the national boundaries, and contemporary artists creating transnational art that opens up the imagination. She also explores artefacts such as coins and statues that hold evidence of a well-blended past history.

Dutta hopes to contribute to the thawing of frozen relationships. With keen observation, she brings out the human factor that is, finally, all-important. Conflict transformation and peacebuilding cannot be the work of governments alone; rather inputs from sociological, historical and cultural researchers are essential. In framing her journalistic pieces,



Data drawn upon fresh insights emerging from these varied disciplines. Her writing highlights the multiplicity of possible peacemakers. People working seriously with different perspectives can contribute to building up a set of facts and ideas that can serve as bricks – with which bridges of harmony can be built across the national boundaries.

**The WISCOMP Research Team**

## Introduction

I have a vision of a harmonious South Asia.

It's no mere coincidence that my first few faltering steps in journalism were with the magazine *Himal South Asian*. My article 'Bhulan: What's in a Name', was published there in October 2002. In that essay I discussed the inappropriateness of the scientific naming of the sub-continental dolphins, Indus 'bhulan' *Platanista minor* and the Gangetic 'susu' *Platanista gangetica*, as two separate species. I argued, using molecular biological evidence, that these two river dolphins ought to be classified under one specific category; I suggested *Platanista southasiana*. In a political sense, the dolphins were metaphors for the peoples of the lands irrigated by the Indus and the Ganges.

In May 2003, I formulated my vision more clearly in 'A Pipeline for Peace' published, in *The News International*, Pakistan.

*"So let us begin anew – remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof... Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us." – John F Kennedy*

Shall we step out of the box (Kashmir, LoC, nuclear arsenals)? And think... Think post-Iraq regional solidarity. Think South Asia.

South Asia will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements, which first create a de facto solidarity. The coming together of the nations of South Asia requires elimination of the age-old opposition of India and Pakistan. Any action taken must, in the first place, concern these two countries.

So, when I received the WISCOMP media fellowship to write about Pakistan, my focus was on promoting the idea of Southasiana. Keeping with Kennedy's advice, in these essays I have tried to explore what unites us instead of belaboring what divides us.



'Registering in Lahore' is an account of the cordial relationship that gradually developed with the Foreign Registration Officers at the City Police Head-Quarters, Lahore; initial suspicion and skepticism yielding over time to mutual respect and consideration.

'A Taste of Berries' describes the common heritage between India and Pakistan, of flora, of shared colonial legacy, the shared trauma of the Partition, and contrasts it with the irony of the restrictive visa policy that prevents any meaningful sharing happening between the peoples of the two sister nations today.

'Lest It's Too Late' takes the visa issue forward where a youth group in Lahore gets together under the banner Youth Initiative for a Visa-Free and Peaceful South Asia.

'Dupatta Days' is a personalized discussion on the possibility of living in peace with 'the other', and the compromises that are involved, particularly if one is a woman.

'Now Temple, Now Restaurant' on Saidpur village in Islamabad describes how Hindus and Muslims have lived together affably in the past, and urges present governments to preserve the monuments bearing the memories of such peaceful coexistence with utmost care.

'Coins Tell Tales Too' discusses the extensive historical legacy - notably Greco-Roman, Pre-Hindu, Hindu, Buddhist, Arab, Muslim, British - that is the common heritage of Pakistan and India.

'Art and Pluralism' describes the dialogue that happened at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century between Lahore and Kolkata, between Abanindranath Thakur's neo-Bengal school artists and those of Lahore, such as Abdur Rahman Chughtai. It discusses the ultimately divisive nature of revivalist cultural nationalism and contrasts it with the holistic syncretism in the works of present generation artists like Shazia Sikander of Pakistan. Finally, hope is placed in moving out of narrow, nationalist agendas and creating a harmonious global community.

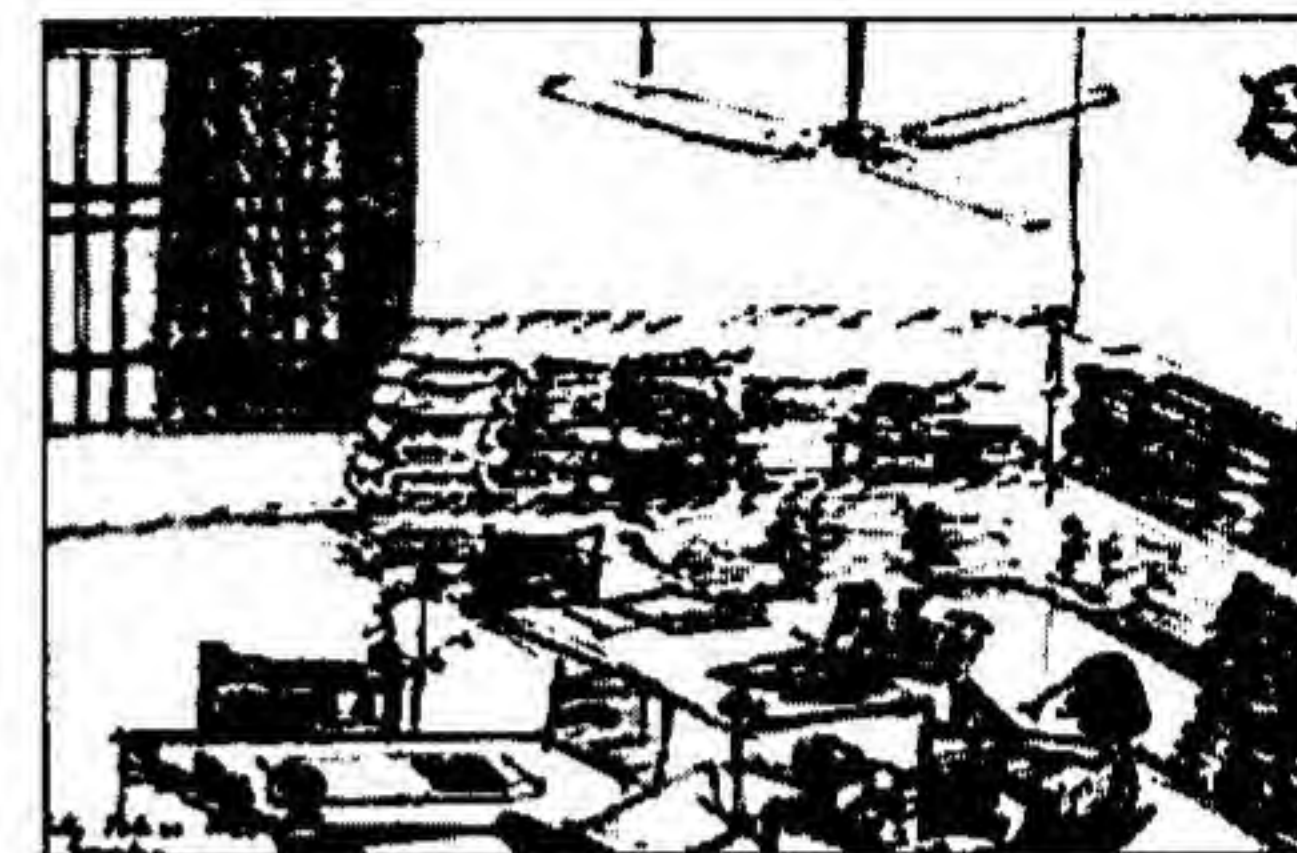
**Rinku Dutta**

## Registering in Lahore

*An Indian Bengali finds a welcoming face at Pakistan's front door.*

**Himal, Kathmandu, March-April 2006**

Not even my arch-enemies will accuse me of being lily-livered - least of all, the Foreign Registration officers at the Lahore Police Headquarters. In fact, some of them are reluctantly appreciative of my holding-my-own as an Indian woman before the overbearing, muscled-moustachioed-macho Pakistani law-keepers.



Sketch by Rinku Dutta

As I strode into the Foreign Registration (FR) office this time, I glanced around, checking for the faces, objects and arrangements of re-association in potentially hostile territory. The clock that used to be on the right wall, I noticed, was now above the door.

"Arre Professor Saheba! Aap kab ayeen? Itne maheenon ke baad hume yaad aaye?" ("Oh, hello Professor Saheba! When did you arrive? You remember us after so many months?")

The officer rising to welcome me 'home' looked familiar from my last visit, almost a year earlier, when I had come to report my exit from the country. Then too he had touched me with his genuine warmth. "Professor Saheba, why are you leaving?" he had teased. "Are you upset with us?"

I was touched. I smiled and assured him that his apprehensions were misplaced - I was leaving because of other reasons. Over my year's stay and three-monthly visits to extend my visa, the officers and clerks at the FR office and I had become well-acquainted with one another: So Chief Officer K didn't probe. He ordered tea.



I had to politely refuse. "When I return, Inshallah."

God-willed or otherwise, I went back to Lahore less than a year later. Chief Officer K looked quizzically at me as I inspected the office's changes. "I was looking for the clock," I explained. "It was on that wall when I first came here in December 2002."

"You remember?"

"Yes. And besides, I had made a sketch."

I happened to be carrying my sketchbook in my bag, and I showed him the pen-drawing I had made of the FR office the first time that I had come to 'police report'. Officer K showed it around appreciatively to the others in the room, and each guessed as to the identity of the snoozing officer depicted.

I had made the drawing sitting in the same chair in which I was currently seated, but Officer K had not been present. Waiting for the clerks, I had busied myself sketching the office, until I was shooed out by an officer suspicious of my busy pen. Sometime during my subsequent visits to the FR office, however, my presence must have been accepted as benign. Refuting my misgivings, they have proven to be respectfully courteous and proactively helpful.

Chief Officer K has been particularly impressive – dealing every day with aliens, especially the 'enemy' Indians, compassionately and considerately. Knowing that he was in the FR office eased much of the anxiety that I had suffered the first two times I was in Lahore.

The day I was leaving, while sipping a Mirinda in his office, in tottered two old gentlemen. Indians. Octogenarians. Chief Officer K looked at me and commented disparagingly: "Old people above 65 years of age were to have been given 'police-reporting-free' visas. That was the supposed understanding between our countries. Look at these two – one 87-year-old Indian has come to visit his 83-year-old Pakistani blood-brother, and the two have traveled all the way here to report the Indian elder's arrival!"

Looking through the documents, he addressed the younger brother, who was helping the older one into a chair: "Please, next time neither you nor he needs to come here to report. Just send the relevant papers through someone else. We will take care of it."

Officer K is all for peace between India and Pakistan. Visa procedures have become stricter these days, sometimes cutting the number of applicants the Lahore office processes by two-thirds.

To have a peace-loving chief officer at the Lahore Foreign Registration office is an enormous blessing. To express my gratitude, I gave him a framed, enlarged copy of the sketch that he had admired. He wanted to hang it on the wall of the renovated office, but I gave him one to stand on his less obtrusive side-cabinet instead.



## A Taste of Berries

*Visa laws don't make it easy for Indians in Pakistan – but Lahore exudes a charm that makes all the hassles worth it.*

**The Friday Times, Lahore, May 12-18, 2006**

Driving down Lahore's Mall Road to the Home Ministry Office to apply for an extension of my visa, palms sweaty and throat dry, I fail to appreciate the sunshine bouncing off the orange funnels of tiger lilies colouring the median. A puff of cotton hovering over the cars catches my attention. I follow its rise and fall – now just missing the raised white glove of a traffic policeman, now gliding behind the motorcyclist whose T-shirt logo inspires: "Think DONE"! The light turns green; the car lurches forward. I catch a last glimpse of the white ball rising above the blue smoke of spluttering auto-rickshaws. Soon, I discover the source of the cotton: Shimul, the silk cotton trees bordering the road, powder-puff seeds attached to split pods. A month ago these branches were resplendent in satin-red flowers. Now the blood-red tiger-claws of *Erythrina* cheerlead the summer blooms. We cross the Avari Hotel. The hotel recently hosted the first grand Hindu wedding in 18 years. Incidentally, I haven't heard of a single renowned, extant Hindu (or Sikh) in the two years I've frequented Lahore. Considering that this was once a major Hindu and Sikh city, this is a reminder of how Partition totally changed its demography.

**Above the plaster-raised Scales of Justice waves the Pakistani flag. I study it with interest. If I were to seek a permanent solution to my visa issues, I might need to change my nationality.**

Cruising along, I spot another favourite plant – *Albizia*. My heart swells with memories of strolls with my mother, the air perfumed by the pompoms of the Shirish, as they are called in Bengal. I am delighted to find these old friends: tiger lilies that bordered the driveway of our house in West Bengal; Shimul, the monarch of our garden; Shirish, that lined the road. I never expected to see them in Lahore, including

Paulash (*Butea*), its flower symbolizing the onset of spring. I forget my fears about my visa and begin enjoying the drive: the ancient trees – Peepul, Neem, Arjun, Seesham – their gnarled branches meshing overhead in a leafy canopy. Some of them are perhaps over 60 years old; it's ironic that the people they had grown with were uprooted while they have held their ground! We pass the High Court, a beautiful example of Mughal-Gothic architecture. Above the plaster-raised Scales of Justice waves the Pakistani flag. I study it with interest. Tomorrow, if I were to seek a permanent solution to my visa issues in Pakistan, I might need to change my nationality. For while other foreigners (except Israelis) can opt for a 7-year residency permit as a relative of a Pakistani, I, as an Indian, can only stay here on month long visit visas despite the fact that I am married to a Pakistani. I can try to prolong my stay; the length of extension appears to depend on the discretion of members of the upper echelons of the Federal Home Ministry. The Indian spouse of another Indo-Pak couple managed to obtain a 6-month extension. They were told that this was the maximum allowed to an Indian spouse; if she wished to stay longer, she must apply for Pakistani citizenship. The Indian laws are no less stringent. By precluding long-term residency permits and requiring the sacrifice of the original citizenship, the present immigration rules make settling down in any one country, India or Pakistan, a major disincentive for Indo-Pak couples. The pair I mentioned became frustrated by having to navigate the hostile regulations and opted for an unconventional marriage. They now maintain parallel homes in the two countries and meet whenever the visa regimes are merciful, or rendezvous in neighbouring lands like Nepal – not an option that many would exercise. After initial resistance, most couples capitulate – one partner of the cross-border pair surrenders his or her passport. For Siddiqua Faruqi, a Karachiite married to an Indian and who now lives in Delhi, changing nationality was a traumatic decision, put off until circumstances made it unavoidable. Predictable grief ensued: Siddiqua could not get a Pakistani visa in time to be at her brother's funeral in Karachi.

We swing left at Kim's canon Zamzama, made famous by Kipling. The Lahore Museum, whose first curator was Rudyard's father, is to the right. The other day I met Naheed Rizvi, the director of the museum.



## Lest It's Too Late: Towards a Visa-free South Asia

We discussed the Bengal School of Paintings, part of the museum's most treasured assets. Samarendranath Gupta, a Bengali, taught the celebrated Lahori painter Abdur Rehman Chughtai. We arrive at our destination and I go to the Section Officer's desk. Since I'm a frequent petitioner, his is a familiar face. I am assured a two month extension. Now we're driving back. Released from the crisis, we give in to a *falsa* vendor at a traffic-light. Buying a packet, S asks the youngster: "Are they sweet?" He replies: "*Munh ka zaiqa badl de ga* – it'll change the flavour in your mouth." I pop a salt-sprinkled magenta berry in my mouth and wince. It's tangy! The next time someone asks me why I take all this trouble to stay in Pakistan, what holds me in Pakistan (S aside), I'll steal the *falsa* seller's line and challenge, "*Chakh ke dekho. Munh ka zaiqa badl jaega!*"

King Khan, Mr. Shahrukh Khan:

*Arre! mujhe apne lie naheen chahiye visa. Meri Zaara hai oos taraf, mujhe hath hila rahee hai... "Veer! Mere paas ao, please mujhe le jao yahan se. Baees saal ho gaye yah.na rahte rahte. Abbhi agar visa nahee milega to kab milega?" hmh hmh! PLEASE mujhe visa de dijie warna meri Zaara mar jaegi. Meri Zaara MAR JAEGI!*

(I don't need a visa for myself. My Zaara is on the other side. She's waving to me – "Veer! Please come and take me away. It's been 22 years I've been languishing here. If I don't get a visa now, when will I get it?" Please give me a visa or else my Zaara will die.)

August 9, Nagasaki Day, Alhamrah Theatre, Lahore. Nineteen-year-old Usman Zia has the audience in peals of laughter with his true-to-style mimicry of Bollywood heroes pleading the case for easy visas between India and Pakistan. The Youth Initiative for a Visa-Free and Peaceful South Asia (YIVFPSA) had organized an evening of discussion and cultural program centered on their motto. Introducing the theme of the meet, Mariam Arif – a Senior at Boston College, home for the summer – informs the gathering of young adults that the 182 Indians who were to have participated could not join because they were denied Pakistani visas, thereby striking the keynote for the evening's program.

The youth forum was originally designed to be part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> VFPSA convention that was to be hosted in Lahore from August 6-9 by the Institute of Peace and Secular Studies (IPSS). At the first VFPSA gathering at Delhi this time last year, peace activists from India, Pakistan and Nepal had joined Japanese monk Sekuguchi at Gandhi's Samadhi in observing a symbolic fast for a greater peace and visa-free borders in South Asia. The founder director of IPSS



Ms. Sayeeda Diep was disappointed that this year's meeting had to be cancelled because the Pakistani government did not grant visas to the Indians. Moreover, the government had also refused to offer her any support whatsoever in hosting the visitors for the proposed convention.

Not surprising. Post July 11 Mumbai bombings, the Indo-Pak Peace Process has stalled, if not regressed. The visa regime had eased up over the past three years when there was an unprecedented thaw in the relationship between the two countries that have been arch enemies since the Partition. Friendly cricket matches and exchanges of journalists, artists, school and college students, professionals, business and trade people had kindled hopes of tearing down what Ayaz Amir calls the 'babu curtain', (probably named after the obdurate 'babu' – bureaucracies of either country, that play a major role in propping up the curtain) the world's last purdah still in place after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall.

In undivided India, even at the verge of the Partition, people found it hard to conceive that they would need visas to travel between the two new countries. In Attia Hosain's semi-autobiographical novel 'Sunlight on a Broken Column' two brothers discuss the issue with their mother:

Mother: "I do not understand, son. Saleem is in Calcutta. He will go to Karachi. What is the difference? This will still be his home."

Kemal: "Mother, I wish it were as simple as that. He will, in fact, be going to another country! Don't you see, we will belong to different countries, have different nationalities? Can you imagine every time we want to see each other, we'll have to cross national frontiers? Maybe even have to get visas," he added wryly.

"Oh, come on, Kemal," Saleem laughed, "there is no need to be as dramatic as all that. Visas indeed!"

However incredulous it may have seemed to those who thought like Saleem and his mother, visas indeed became necessary to visit the other country; the 'babu curtain' did indeed go up actualizing the fact

of the Partition. Traveling across became increasingly difficult, if not impossible. Brothers like Kemal and Saleem who chose to live across the border, families that split and settled in the new Pakistan and the new India, had to reconcile with an almost complete severance from each other.

The turn of the century brought a change of mindset and efforts to make peace took on a sincere look. In 2004, the optimism regarding Indo-Pak reconciliation was running so high that Bollywood – always a faithful reflector of the political mood – churned out several bhaichara (literally brotherhood) films, the most successful being Yash Chopra's 'Veer-Zaara'. In this story of cross-border forbidden love, Zaara (Preity Zinta) a Pakistani woman and Veer (Shahrukh Khan) an Indian Air Force Officer, who meet and fall in love but become separated, and Samiya (Rani Mukherjee) a Pakistani lawyer who re-unites them, all travel between the two countries on very short notices. As though there was no visa hurdle to be overcome. As though one could just hop onto a bus or jump into a jeep and cross over to the other side!

Which is exactly how it should be – visa-free travel between the two countries - demand the zesty members of YIVFSA.

Usman Zia impersonates the eminently imitable Amjad Khan of Sholay fame: "Vizhaa...Ye Gabbar ka kanoon hai re! Yahan sa..ab ko vizha milega. Naach Basanti naach!" (Visa. This is Gabbar's law. Everyone will get visas. Dance, Basanti, dance!)

'Everyone will get visas' – may be assured in Amjad Khan's reel world, but not so in the real world. 'Kaheen der na ho jaye' (Lest It's Too Late), a play written by 16-year-old Sameer Afzal of Government College University Lahore and directed by 20-year-old Ayesha Arif of Rutgers College New Jersey, explores the trauma of separation across the visa-regulated Indo-Pak border. The play was the crowd-puller of the evening and was staged before a packed hall.

Inspired by the 1994 film 'Mammo' by Shyam Benegal, where Mehmooda Begum (nickname Mammo), widow of a Pakistani, is unable to extend her temporary visa to stay in India to raise her sister's



orphaned grandson, and is forcefully deported back to Pakistan, 'Kaheen der na ho jaye' is about two loving sisters Gurpreet and Parmeet, who end up on either side of the Radcliffe Line and are unable to meet. Gurpreet is abducted to Pakistan on Parmeet's wedding day. Her kidnapper abandons her and she spends her life working as an ayah at the home of a family who provides her shelter. Parmeet and Gurpreet communicate regularly through letters. They try hard to get visas to visit each other but fail. So they come at pre-arranged times at the Wagah border to just see each other. Years pass. Parmeet is widowed, loses her son and daughter-in-law in an accident, and is raising her grandson alone. Her health is failing. She wants to see her dearest sister before she dies. Gurpreet manages to get a 'Death Certificate' that declares her officially dead in Pakistan. Assisted by sympathetic guards at the Wagah border, she crosses over to India and arrives at Parmeet's home. Too late. Her dear sister has passed away.

Writer Sameer Afzal notes in the hand-out about the play, that the real-life story of Zohra Sehgal and Uzra Butt, 'two living legends' of 'Ek thee Naani' fame, had inspired him to write this play: "This story is a satire on the perception of governments, who think that by creating borders and enforcing permission in the form of a visa, they can actually stop two long-separated sisters from meeting... It is really thought-provoking that one actually has to ask the government and wait for permission to meet one's loved ones."

Although not quite as luminous as their veteran counterparts Zohra and Uzra, teenagers Bakht Arif as Gurpreet and Hania S. Chima as Parmeet succeeded in bringing out the pathos of the tragic lives of the two sisters through their moving performances. In her directorial debut, Ayesha Arif deserves kudos for accurate casting, simple but suggestive stage-sets, appropriate costumes, and evoking the acting potentials of her novice team.

The evening's program concluded with the passing of a resolution, the highlights of which are as follows:

1. The boundaries of the countries of South Asia (SA) must be made visa-free so that people can interact freely and strengthen their ties.
2. Student exchange programs between Pakistani and Indian institutions must be encouraged.
3. History must be written from an unbiased and secular point of view. False ideas of nationalism bordering on fanaticism based on hatred for Hindus or Muslims or any religious order must be shunned.
4. The problem of Jammu and Kashmir must be resolved according to the wishes and aspirations of the people, especially the youth, of Jammu and Kashmir.
5. All countries of SA must stop the militarization of the region. India and Pakistan must agree on the creation of a nuclear-weapons-free zone in SA.
6. Finally, *we the youth believe in taking the peace process in our own hands*. We condemn the violence and aggression perpetrated by states and support pro-people social movements in the region.

Talking to the youngsters after the program, I was impressed by the fervor of their conviction: "The Oldies may think this is wishful thinking, but we *will* create a visa-free, peaceful SA. We shall overcome..."

"But how will we deal with cross-border terrorism in a visa-free SA?" I challenge them with an 'Oldie' question. Mariam rebuts, "Honestly, I don't think that terrorists are using visas to cross over. They are infiltrating illegally. Preventing the ordinary civilian from visiting the neighboring country is not helping prevent terrorism". Sameer moderates: "No doubt making SA visa-free will increase the risks of terrorist activity. But hey! No risk, no gain! The benefits far outweigh the risks".

Ayesha has a personal stake in the issue. She has a dream: train at the Pune Film Institute. "That's the best place for me! With the current visa policy, it is almost impossible for me to go and study there. Not



only do I want a visa-free SA, but I also want freedom of residence. I should be able to stay on in Pune or Bombay and work there”.

Bakht feels the same way. She is versatile – a talented actor, singer and dancer. She had sung the opening song for the program –

*Eeshwar Allah tere jahan mein  
Nafrat kyun hai jang hai kyun  
Tera dil to itna bara hai  
Insaan ka dil tang hai kyun*

(Eeshwar, Allah, in your world  
Why is their hatred and war?  
You are so gracious  
Why are human hearts so filled with discord?)

Bakht revealed her frustration in finding good teachers for classical music and dance in Lahore: “I would like to go to India where there’s so much more scope for receiving such training”.

Given the dearth of opportunities in the arts, the team members expressed their indebtedness to Madeeha Gauhar’s Ajoka Theatre for honing their skills in theatre performance and broadening their horizons. Sameer, Ayesha, Bakht, Mariam have all participated in Ajoka’s play ‘Border Border’ and have toured India with the Ajoka troupe. In Shaheed Nadeem’s play ‘Border-Border’, children from India and Pakistan, who meet at the border, share the same names and idolize the same heroes and heroines. Since they had always wanted to visit the places where their grandparents had once lived, the children break the border regulations and sneak into forbidden territories.

Usman Zia, who has never visited India, expresses the sentiment of the common man-on-the-street – *India dushman mulk hai* (India is an enemy nation). But according to him, even the man-on-the-street will agree that the time has come to end old hostilities. The world is speeding ahead. No one wants to be left behind trapped in the shackles of history.

Or risk being nuked by each other in another war. Usman mimics Sunny Deol – “*Arre aajkal ka jang wo jang nahee raha priya! Arre! ye wo*

*jang hai, idhar se tum button dabaoge udhar se wo button dabaenge,  
saaab kuchh khatam ho jaega, na ye mulk rahega, na ye visa rahega,  
aur na ye larayeean rahengi! Mera pyar sachha hai priya! Aur mera  
pyaar tumhari hifazat karega tum jahan bhi jaoage!”*

(Today’s war is not like previous wars, my love! In this war you press a button here, he presses a button there, and everything is destroyed – these countries, these visas, these conflicts, nothing will remain. My love is true, dear! And it will protect you no matter where you go.)

“War only brings destruction and chaos and nothing else,” asserts Sameer passionately. “Pakistan is spending like more than 78% of its budget on defense and less than 2% on education. Well I think if Pakistan raises its annual budget for education from 2 to 25%, we will have more progress, and rise out of that little shell that the government has imposed around us – hate everyone and only love your self. We should really get out of this ridiculous shell!”

Clearly, making South Asia visa-free is a way out.



# Dupatta Days

The Friday Times, Lahore, August 26 – September 1, 2005

These are turbulent times around the world, perhaps more so in Pakistan post-7/7 and 22/7, or the London and Sharm-el-Sheikh bombings, respectively. Pakistanis grapple with their country's internal contradictions and, simultaneously, with international criticism. In these anxiety-fraught days, I appreciate quiet time in my office at the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), where sitting at my computer desk I can look out through the ceiling-to floor windows, be soothed by the green vista of well-kept gardens, rest my eyes on the white blossoms of the corner pagoda tree and lift my attention from whatever I am doing to tune in to the calls of birds.

Occasionally I catch a trill that delights my soul... I find my own peace. Others find it differently. Like the people I see emerging after the *Jumma* prayers from the mosque (the Friday prayers intended specifically for communal prayer in a congregation). I can see them from my window as I type on my keyboard – some in light *shalwar kameez*, some in trouser-shirts, a few in jeans. All men, no women – ‘The Boys Club,’ as Z calls them! I watch the men descend the short flight of stairs to the paved road – some hurried and stumbling as they put on their shoes, tottering on one leg as they bend over to pull sandal straps up over their heels. Others, less eager to push ahead, take their time in finding their shoes, while still others stand around chatting. Here's S now, with his distinctive curly black beard. Curious how the eyes and brain can recognize people even from a distance of almost 200 metres. I wish I had my binoculars to see the expressions on their faces as they step out of the house of worship. Are they writ with heavenly peace? Looking at the mix of people emerging from the main entrance of the mosque – officers, academics, blue-uniformed guards – I am reminded of our trip to the Tirupathi Temple in South India. There were different queues for the entrance – the Rs 5000 line, the Rs 1000 line, the ‘free’ line. All lines led to the same temple, only some were shorter and granted more viewing and worship privileges. For example, the people in the

‘paid’ lines were allowed faster access (in proportion to the sum paid) to the deity housed inside the temple, and allowed to spend more time making their food and flower offerings and ritual prayers through the mediation of the temple priests.

**Promotion of brotherhood amongst men has been the unique strength of Muslim societies. However, the exclusion of women has been their chief weakness.**

Pakistani society is no less corrupt and hierarchical than Indian society. But at least inside the mosque, no class distinctions are permitted: the *malik* (the land or factory owner) and the *mazdoor* (the labourer) may have to pray alongside each other in the mosque. One cannot choose one's prayer spot inside the prayer hall. Last year, on our way to Hunza, we stopped for lunch at a roadside restaurant beside a swift-flowing spring. As we sat around on *charpais* waiting for the food to arrive, I noticed a prayer-place on the opposite bank, beneath a *seesham* tree – a number of threadbare mats on the rocky ground, nothing more. I was pleasantly surprised to see a couple of LUMS boys in Jeans and T-shirts cross over and pray alongside truck and bus drivers and restaurant workers. This promotion of brotherhood amongst men from all strata of society and all parts of the world – equality before One God – has been the unique strength of Muslim societies. However, the exclusion of women from this universal fellowship has also been their chief weakness. Unlike in Hindu temples, women are not allowed to pray with men in most mosques.

Here in Lahore, in this elite private institution of higher learning, the mosque at LUMS has the traditional separate anteroom for women to recite their prayers. Apparently, men cannot be trusted to not be distracted by female forms. Fear of lasciviousness dominates Muslim codes of social conduct. And living in Pakistan, I am constantly reminded of the Eve, the eternal temptress, in me – whether in holding myself back from shaking hands with men fearful of ‘losing their *deen* [religion],’ or making sure that my bosom is screened by a *dupatta*. Under the relentless male gaze (as a woman put it, “you can't go to



buy bread in a bakery and not have the salesman ogle”), it is hard not to feel like an insect pinned for dissection on a wax tray. Worse still, I have to constantly struggle against distorting my self image; for I have always seen myself as a person first and a woman as only one of my several identities as poet, artist, scientist. The *dupatta* rests uneasy around my neck like a stranglehold. Whither peace? The view outside my window is peaceful, the grass green, the blossoms on the pagoda tree white. But the gunmetal sky is weighing heavily on the white and the green. I’m trying only to *make* my peace with this place.

## Now Temple, Now Restaurant

Newsline, Karachi, July 2006

Shouldn’t the CDA be more circumspect in converting a Hindu temple into a restaurant?

I had not expected to find a Kali temple in Islamabad. So I was strangely moved when I found myself standing in front of an abandoned one, in the village of Saidpur, off Margalla Road. The temple was beautifully preserved; its pyramidal shikhar (tapering roof) had a fresh coat of ochre paint, the square walls were whitewashed, and the floral motifs on them were undamaged by the ravages of time. Or man.

My guide, 76-year-old Ghulam Nabi, one of the oldest residents of the village, remembers the ‘*peetal murti*’ (brass statue) of the Mother Goddess Kali that had arrived from Kolkata, and which the Hindus had carried barefeet all the way from the station. Ironically, the wooden board that hung over the locked entrance to the temple now reads ‘Home Economics Lab.’ The temple and the adjoining dharamshala, originally a rest house for visitors, are being used as a children’s school providing education up to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade; girls study in the morning shift and boys in the afternoon shift.

“What happened to the *murti*?” I asked Ghulam Nabi. “After the Partition riots began, and the Hindus left the village, some people came and took it away. But see how well we have kept your *ibadatkhana* (place of worship),” he hastened to reassure me, pointing to the well-kept school premises. Indeed, it was a pretty school: cheerful red flowerpots neatly lined the wide flight of stairs leading up to a high plinth. The spacious quadrangular platform was checkered by black and white marble slabs as in a chessboard. On the right of the quadrangle was the temple, to the left was a double-domed accounts office over which flew the Pakistani flag, and in front were the halls where classes were held. Lush bougainvilleas climbed up the pillars to the intricately designed balconies. On the front face of the building was the symbol ‘om’ engraved in black over a round plaque of white



marble. Beside it, painted in large blue Roman letters were Jinnah's urging to the nascent country of Pakistan: Unity, Discipline, Faith; and all along the walls, verses from the Quran in Arabic script.

It was afternoon. The boys were in their classes. But there was one class being held in the open, under a tall jamun tree that had a peculiar, centrally split trunk. The sight of the young boys seated cross-legged on the paved courtyard with their books on their laps and their master reading to them was very reminiscent of Tagore's Shantiniketan in West Bengal. The teacher halted his lesson and came up to greet me. I asked him whether he had any idea about the history of the Kali temple. He shook his head, embarrassed. He is not from Saidpur. He expressed sadness that people, including him, had grown apathetic about their cultural heritage. "Who were we before Bin Qasim? Our forefathers were from this land and they must have been either Hindus or practiced some other local form of worship. We are all converts. It's a shame that we don't take any interest in understanding our ancient roots."

Actually, it was a friend's quest for her family roots that had brought me to Saidpur. "It's a village named Saidpur at the foot of some hills. Here are some names from our family tree," she had written. It had been a magic moment of shivering illumination when brushing the dust off the engraved Devnagari letters on one of the marble slabs on the quadrangle, I had pronounced in mystified incredulity 'Mayadevi,' my friend's grandmother's name. There were quite a few of these in-memory slabs paving the plinth, some in Hindi written in Devnagari, some in Urdu written in Nasta'liq. Beside names, they also mentioned the amounts donated to the temple. In this case it was rupees 10. It turned out that despite the coincidence of names this was not my friend's village after all; her ancestors came from another Saidpur in Chakwal District. Nevertheless, the Kali temple and the villagers' past links with Kolkata established my own ties with Saidpur. Ghulam Nabi, a cobbler by profession, recounted his travels in Bengal before the Partition. Nabi had gone to supervise his uncle's factory near Kolkata that had manufactured shoes for the British army. A crowd had gathered around us as we talked. Someone in the throng made a snide remark: "It couldn't have been nice living among the Hindus and being served

food in separate vessels!" "There was no question of feeling insulted because people there ate on disposable banana leaves!" was Ghulam Nabi's tactful reply, defusing the momentary tension.

The sharp-witted old man with patchy unpigmented skin proceeded to enlighten me on the four kunds (water reservoirs) that lay buried beneath where we were standing, the open land before the temple gate. They were named after the characters of the Hindu epic Ramayana – Ram, Sita, Laxman and Hanuman. A young boy Nauman had earlier mentioned this to me soon after I had arrived in the village. He had trailed us for a while and then courageously approached to ask directly: "Are you Hindu?" He had pointed to the ground and told me about the kunds that had been paved over but which were connected by pipes to the Saidpur Waterworks. His grandfather had related to him how the Hindus who used to live in this village had used these kunds for ablution before offering prayers in the temple. The women had used the Sita kund.

I was surprised that Nauman, who must be less than 10 years old, knew about the Hindu history of the village. Children growing up in Saidpur seem to have indulged in myths as well. Kamal Kayani told me about the huge cobra that is rumoured to guard the khazana (treasure) in the cellars below the temple. Her father, Irij Zaman, the seventh generation progeny of the founder of this village, Raja Said Khan of the Gakkhar D tribe, relates stories of mutual regard and friendship between the Hindus and Muslims who had lived in peace for over 200 years in Saidpur. According to the philosophic Irij, states may frequently change ownership but cultural practices are biased towards continuity. The Hindu history of the village lives on in customs and practices.

The farmers still follow the Hindu months – chet, baisakh, sawan, bhado for their crop calendar. Dholaks and music bands add to wedding festivities. Legends have also survived from the period of shared history. Irij told me that when the big earthquake happened last October, an old lady of the village had been heard explaining to others that earthquakes occur when the cow that supports the earth on its horn shifts the burden to its other horn. It was deeply gratifying to find that despite the state agenda since Partition, the memories of the Hindus of Saidpur have not been edited out of history altogether.



That it survives in so many forms in the village. But this heartwarming story may change soon. As will the rustic life of the villagers of Saidpur. As will the fate of the school and that of the Kali temple. Rupees 400 million were sanctioned last year to develop Saidpur into a 'model tourist village.' The intentions of Kamran Lashari, the chairman of the Capital Development Authority, to preserve the village culture and the old architecture of the buildings, including the Kali temple, and make Saidpur a yaadgaar (monument to memory) centre of recreation appears visionary. Architect Naeem, who is in charge of making the elevations and modelling of Saidpur, is very optimistic. He had also been part of Lashari's Food Street Project in Lahore, which has been such a runaway success. The design plans for Saidpur have already been approved. The chashma (spring) that runs through the village, but which has lately become an open sewer, will be revived. Broadwalks have been planned on either side of the spring. Selected buildings with old architectural designs will receive a facelift.

The Kali temple, itself, will be restored to its original appearance. The school will be relocated. The temple will be made into a restaurant. The temple as a restaurant brought to mind pictures of the décor of Cooco's den, Lahore's famous eat-out place overlooking the Badshahi mosque. On one tier of the open-terraced, multistoried restaurant there is a beautiful, lifesize marble statue of Mother Mary holding a cut tulip in her hand. It's not wooden pews that face her but rows of dining tables and chairs. Amidst the smoky fumes of barbequed meat, the jingle of Hindi film music, the clinking of glasses and babble of conversation, I had thought: Mary looks so sad. But Cooco's den carries it off, as it is in any case a statement in irreverence being housed in a brothel building in the red-light area of Heera Mandi. But shouldn't the CDA be more circumspect in converting a Hindu temple into a restaurant? It is one thing to convert antiquated palaces, castles, fortresses and havelis into hotels and quite another matter to turn a once-place-of-worship into an eat-out. In these promising days of Indo-Pak peace, has the CDA considered the cultural implications of its gustatory dreams for the Kali temple at Saidpur? Would Kamran Lashari feel comfortable dining at a restaurant that once used to be a mosque? Memories of the land lie buried in hidden recesses of the

city, in places like the Kali temple in Saidpur and preserved in the oral histories of such villages. Nationalist sentiment is a major factor causing such memories to atrophy. With changing state ideologies, the tides of memory and forgetting leave their mark not just on shelved government documents but also on the yaadgaar monuments built by the state. Often the museum that is created to remember also becomes a place of forgetting.



## Coins Tell Tales Too

*Coins that serve as symbols of dynastic lineage, provide insights into idiosyncratic rulers, and are a testimony to the highly evolved art form of certain periods in history – the Lahore Museum has a treasure trove of 40,000 such coins.*

**Newsline, Karachi, November 2006**

The gold pendant that I wear as a talisman ever since my mother's passing in 1999 is apparently an old coin. I found it in a jewellery box in her bank locker, but cannot recall her ever wearing it. The Arabic inscription on the locket had drawn me to it. Since I was moving to Pakistan, I had given this fortuitous discovery a mystic meaning – her blessings on the unusual path that I had chosen. It was only recently, in the Coins Room of the Lahore museum (LM), that I came to know more about the pendant: it was made from a coin that had been minted in Murshidabad, West Bengal, during the period of the East India Company and the puppet Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II. This revelation is thanks to Naushaba Anjum, coin keeper at the LM. She examined the pendant under a magnifying glass, weighed it on a digital balance, looked up a book, and gave me the following specifics.



Inscribed in Persian (not Arabic, as I had believed) on the obverse face (the 'heads' side or the side carrying the details of the authority guaranteeing the value) of the coin: "*Sikka zaed barhaft kishwar e saya fazal alay hameeya deen Mohammad, Shah Alam II Badshah*" (Coin struck in the shadow of the divine favour of the defender of the faith of Mohammad, Shah Alam II, Emperor) And on its reverse side: The 19th year of accession associated with prosperity, Murshidabad. Shah Alam II ascended the throne in 1759, and the coin was minted

in 1778. 1778! I was astounded to know that the locket that I had been wearing so casually was over 225 years old! Despite its lighter weight, the pendant's resemblance to the East India Company coins of that period was stunning. These machine-struck, Mughal-style East India Company gold coins were popularly called *mohurs*. The Company used them extensively until the British introduced their own monetary system in India through the Coinage Act of 1835. The new coins issued had the image of William IV on the obverse face and the value on the reverse in both English and Urdu.

Naushaba showed me one of the first bilingual coins ever made, dated around 200 BC. This was a rare Indo-Greek coin of Demetrios II. The reverse side of the coin had inscriptions in the local Kharoshti script. "This indicates that Demetrios II was a conqueror-ruler. Not like Demetrios I, who had returned after conquering and did not stay to rule the land," she enlightened me. Importantly, it was from such bilingual coins of Indo- Greek and Kushan rulers that James Princep had deciphered Kharoshti and Brahmi, the ancient scripts of India. The ability to read them gave historians access to the information in rock and other inscriptions that constitute the primary sources of the history of ancient India.

Having aroused my interest in her esoteric subject, numismatics, Naushaba proceeded to explain the wealth of historical knowledge that can be obtained from the study of coins. She began with her area of expertise – the Indo-Greek coins. Covering roughly modern Afghanistan, Pakistan and northern India, several Indo-Greek kingdoms (probably settled by the Greeks after the conquests of Alexander in the 4th Century BC), thrived for more than two centuries starting with Diodotus in 256 BC. Forty-seven Greek kings and queens had ruled Bactria, the area between old Gandhara and Iran. The Bactrian period was a dark phase, in that very few texts are available from that era. There were some written records available on seven kings. The history of the other 40 monarchs has come to us exclusively through the study of coins. This is one of the best examples where numismatics has provided the primary information to fill a large gap in history.

Unique designs on the coins, like the elephant-trunk cap on Demetrios I and Demetrios II, have helped to establish family



connections. The Lahore Museum has 698 coins from the Indo-Greek period. These are the best studied of the 40,000 total coin collection of the museum. Among the Indo-Greek coins, those of Agathocles (185-170 BC) are interesting. This king issued several commemorative coins of Greek emperors, such as the one of Alexander the Great. Indo-Greek coins also provide testimony to the highly evolved art of those times, as evidenced by the realistic portraits and figures depicted on them.

“Were there coins in India, or did the conquering Greeks bring the concept of coins to us?” I enquired. Ancient people lived in a barter society where payment of debts and exchange of goods (trade) and services happened through items of inherent or implied value such as precious metals, gems, conch shells and cigarettes. The concept of money as coins (a piece of metal of defined weight stamped with the symbol of the guaranteeing authority for financial transaction), was conceived by three different civilizations independently and almost simultaneously. Coins were introduced as a means to trade things of daily usage in Asia Minor, India and China in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC. It is widely held that the Greeks of Lydia and Ionia (located on the western coast of Turkey) issued the first coins of the world. These coins were globules of electrum, a naturally occurring alloy of gold and silver.

In India, the first coins were minted around the 5th Century BC in central India. The earliest coins were punch-marked. These coins bear one to five (sometimes more) symbols of various types punched on pieces of silver of specific weight. Unlike the round, bifaced (stamped on both sides) Greek coins, the punch-marked coins had no defined shape, were mostly uniface and lacked any inscriptions written in contemporary languages. Whereas Greek coins were minted using silver, electrum as well as gold, these early Indian coins were almost always struck in silver. Other than for purposes of trade and settlement of debts, coins were also used as symbols of kingship. “Today, when regimes change, the media bring the news to the people. In those days, coins did the job of the media. When one king died or was killed and a new king came to power, he immediately issued a coin to declare that he was the new monarch,” explained Naushaba. This is how we

have traced entire dynasties of kings who were otherwise not mentioned in any historical texts.

Beyond tracing dynastic lines, coins also provide insights into the idiosyncratic personalities of the rulers; for example, through the titles they conferred on themselves through the coins. Alauddin Khilji of the Sultanate period gave himself the grand title, ‘Alexander II.’ Intriguingly, he also dropped the practice of inscribing the Kalma, the names of the four friends of the Prophet (PBUH), and also that of the contemporary *khalifa* of Baghdad that was customarily inscribed on coins issued by Muslim rulers in India. His son Qutb-ud din – Mubarak Shah is also fascinating. He ruled only for five years and was a weak ruler. Nevertheless he gave himself titles even more self-aggrandising than his father, elevating himself to the status of God.

The coins produced during the reign of Muhammad bin Tughlaq are indicative of his innovative streak. He came up with the idea of using token coins. Gold coins were supposed to mainly represent the prosperity of the rulers; they were to enrich the royal treasury. They were also used sparingly to honour noblemen or to be given as gifts to state visitors and dignitaries. Gold coins were not in circulation among the masses. So Muhammed bin Tughlaq minted copper coins as token currency of symbolic value, much like the intrinsically valueless paper currency that we use today. Unfortunately, people made counterfeits of the token coins and his idea failed to be implemented.

The rarest coins in the museum’s collection are from the Sikh period. In addition to coins with beautiful portraits of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, there is a coin with Guru Nanak’s profile. Also, there are the intriguing Mora Shahi coins. Mora was a dancing girl that Ranjit Singh had married. Mora is an epithet derived from *mor* or peacock. The 10,000 odd coins in the museum’s possession from the periods under Hindu rulers are yet to be studied. Who knows, this collection might have even more rare coins.

Progress on research on the LM’s coin collection has been slow. Numismatics is not a well-established subject in this country. There are less than a handful of Pakistani experts in the field. Naushaba



received training on Indo-Greek coins at the British Museum. She would like to acquire expertise in handling coins from other historical periods, and hopes that the government will realise the importance of creating indigenous experts in this area, instead of relying on foreign professionals.

On my way out of the Lahore museum, I paused at the replica of the statue of the famous Fasting Buddha (the original is in the Gandhara gallery of the LM) placed inside the coins room. I wondered at the irony of situating the statue there, among the steel lockers full of coins: Crown Prince Gautama had left his palace and wealth to find a way to escape from human suffering.

## Art and Pluralism

*Dutta talks about the richly heterogenous heritage of sub-continental art that defies the east and west cultural war that has sprung up since 9/11.*

**Newsline, Karachi, August 2006**

Since 9/11, Muslim militancy has hogged the headlines. This phenomenon has provoked a global interest in the relationship of identity, faith, and violence, with a particular focus on Islam. Books such as *Identity and Violence* by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, and art exhibitions like “Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking” – a survey of the works of a number of contemporary artists who hail from the Islamic world – held this spring at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) New York, are recent examples of the various forms of intellectual engagement that this enquiry is taking.

In his book, Sen pleads with his readers to acknowledge and embrace the plurality of our identities: “the same person can be, without any contradiction, an American citizen, of Caribbean origin, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a vegetarian, a long-distance runner, a historian, a feminist, a heterosexual.” Sen’s prescription for peaceful co-existence is to avoid, what he calls, the “solitarist” approach, under which people are neatly, but very wrongly, partitioned into Western or Eastern, Muslim or Christian or Hutu and Tutsi, or even being Pro-Globalization and Anti-Globalization – with no space for the assumption and exercise of other identities.’

Fereshteh Daftari, who curated the MoMa exhibition, addresses the ambiguity of identity in art in the very title of her introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition: “Islamic or Not.” She argues against the reductive simplification implied in such kinds of categorisation.

Prominent in the MoMA show were eight works of Pakistani-born Shahzia Sikander, trained in Mughul miniature painting at the National College of Arts, Lahore. Influenced by Sigmar Polke, ‘layering paint and narrative’ in her miniatures has been Shahzia’s forte. The contemporary narrative of post 9/11 politics informs her



composition 'Web': fighter planes caught in a spider's web in some oil-rigged corner of the globe is juxtaposed with the traditional hunting motifs of a lion devouring a deer, and a leopard threatening the peace of a paradisiacal garden of flowering shrubs, gazelles and birds. This is quintessentially 21st century miniature painting.

Shahzia is one of a small group of artists, including Nilima Sheikh from India, who engage in developing an active relationship with the forms that refer to earlier visual traditions of the subcontinent. Yet, Shahzia's treatment of traditional motifs in her miniatures is neither nostalgic nor revivalist.

Not in the way it was for the father of modern Pakistani art, Abdur Rahman Chughtai. Chughtai's artistic heritage dated back to the Bengal School pioneered by Abanindranath Thakur, a nephew of Robindronath Thakur. Samarendranath Gupta, a student of Abanindranath, had brought the style from Kolkata to Lahore when he became the principal of the Mayo School of Art – now the NCA. Chughtai, a student at Mayo School, was initiated into the Bengal watercolor techniques; he mastered the method and integrated it into his distinctive style.

The year 1906 was the turning point: Chughtai rejected the Bengal School and turned to Mughul miniatures. Chughtai had visited the Bengal School in 1905 after the Partition of the state into East and West Bengal; he had witnessed the heightened divisiveness between the Hindu and Muslim communities of Bengal. In 1906 the Muslim League was founded to represent the political demands of Muslim Indians, and the poet Muhammad Iqbal proposed the creation of the separate Muslim state of Pakistan. Chughtai decided to commit himself to a revival of Mughal aesthetics. The issue became one of forging a Muslim identity in his works. He veered away from the Bengal School as India began to crack along communal lines, culminating in the 1947 Partition that split Punjab and Bengal, with Lahore falling within the nascent Muslim country, Pakistan and Kolkata in the predominantly Hindu India.

Ironically, the Bengal School of Art itself was a product of a crisis in identity: it was born at the turn of the 20th century primarily as a reaction to the British imperial imposition of Western values on Indian

art. It nucleated at the Society of Oriental Art, and in Jorashanko, the residence of the talented Thakur family in Kolkata. As an indigenous solution to issues of identity and self-representation, the Bengal School sought to expose and displace the colonialist's art and substitute its own mission of self-expression and national regeneration.

Abanindranath, who had received training in the European Academic style of painting from Olinto Gilhardi and Charles Palmer, sought to remain true to Indian traditions, experience and sensibility, while making use of European conventions. The principal aspiration of the Bengal School painters was to reinstate the numinous, mystical image at the heart of Indian art that had been under-valued under the British naturalist art education.

Abanindranath was inspired by Far-eastern art, specifically Japanese watercolours. The emotively nuanced 'wash' technique he evolved from observing Japanese artist Yokoyama Taikan became, in time, the chief trademark of the 'Abanindranath style' of Indian painting. Though he experimented in many forms, Abanindranath's most obvious debt was to Mughal paintings. Under his brush the Mughal miniature-style paintings became highly emotive, capturing an intensity, exemplified in his famous study, 'The Passing of Shah Jahan'.

Befriended by E.B. Havell, Superintendent of the Calcutta Art School, Abanindranath secured official patronage and furthered the nationalist cause by influencing the curricula of the government schools of art. The neo-Bengal art was a synthesis of Ajanta fresco, Mughal/Pahari/Rajput miniature, European naturalism, and Japanese wash techniques. By the 1920s, the Bengal School had established its 'self-conscious role of a movement which restored to Indian art, its independence and lost identity.'

Despite the Bengal School's success in forging a new 'Indian' art, the tension between the revivalist recovery of past Indian art traditions and the progressive openness to new developments in global art, soon splintered the Bengal School. Nandalal Bose adopted the Japanese minimalist style to depict the lives of ordinary villagers. Jamini Roy, a primitivist, infused new life into the dying tradition of patua folk art. While Gaganendronath Thakur went on to experiment with



Cubism, Rabindranath Thakur bent towards an inward-looking expressionism.

Post 9/11, identity politics has reared its hydra head, fomenting an 'us' versus 'them' cultural war. Culture can be defined as a system of human practices that constitute society; it involves interconnected spheres of activity – a web of social interactions encompassing economics, politics, morals, religion, art, and language. Our culture is our primary sense of identity defining who we are. Post-independence, many artists have travelled and trained outside the subcontinent, and some have migrated to new lands. So our culture is increasingly acquiring a global character. Consequently, the discourse on contemporary South Asian art oscillates between multiple dichotomies, such as that of past and present, tradition and modernity, religious and secular, sub-urban and metropolitan. The South Asian artist is challenged to resolve these dichotomies, and to arrive at their own distinctive viewpoint.

As the Pakistani and Indian diaspora grows, and as more South Asian artists live and create art in their native locations and their residences abroad, these dichotomies often tend towards a syncretic solution. Artists begin to juxtapose diverse sources – often playfully – displaying a global sensibility. So much so that it is difficult to speak of a monolithic 'Indian' or 'Pakistani' art form. An increasingly popular trend is to create harmonious hybrids by bringing together signifiers from different cultures (Hindu, Muslim, Christian) and time periods, Eastern and Western, within the same artwork as exemplified in the modernist miniatures created by Shahzia Sikander. Works such as Shahzia's, where images of varied origins are represented on the same canvas (for example when she uses a traditional Hindu image of the goddess Kali and superimposes it onto a veiled Muslim female form), provoke the destabilisation of fixed meanings. The foremost being that of fixed identity.

In addressing the fluidity of identity and embracing our heterogeneous heritage, South Asian art has come a long way from the nationalist, revivalist agendas of Abanindranath's Bengal School or that of Chughtai in Lahore who searched for identity in pre-Colonial/pre-Partition cultural roots. It is in the works of artists like Shahzia, that

one finds a rich transplant of traditions in a contemporary context. Artists like her are striding many worlds and breaking out of narrow, nationalist agendas; their works contemplate a global culture.

And herein lies hope for harmony.